*The Rhythm of Government: Attention in China's Central- and Provincial-Level Executive Meetings**

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Abstract

Government attention plays a crucial role in agenda-setting and ensuring good governance. This article examines the distribution, stability, fragmentation and transmission of government attention using data from 2,840 government executive meetings at central and provincial levels in China. The findings reveal distinct patterns in attention allocation between the central and provincial governments. While the central government focuses predominantly on the economy, provincial governments show a notable interest in organizational functioning and environmental protection. Furthermore, provincial governments consistently address a broad spectrum of policy areas, in contrast to the more unstable attention focus of the central government. Interestingly, the concentration of attention at the central level is comparable to that of Western counterparts, such as Britain and Australia. Additionally, panel

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data analysis shows that provincial governments respond to the central agenda. Ceteris paribus, an additional mention of a policy area by the central government correlates with a 0.109 times increase (OLS regression) or a 1.918 percent increase (Poisson regression) in the number of mentions at the provincial level. These findings suggest that the diverse patterns of attention allocation and the hierarchical transmission of attention make the Chinese government an organized and agile entity capable of concerted efforts to advance national interests.

Attention allocation is crucial for shaping policy agendas.[1] According to Jones and Baumgartner, "the process by which information is prioritized for action, and attention allocated to some problems rather than others is called agenda setting."[2] The past few decades have witnessed substantial advances in understanding the rationale behind agenda-setting and government policymaking in electoral democracies, with the punctuated equilibrium model emerging as one of the most influential theories in this field.[3] Adopting a pluralist approach,[4] the extensive literature on this subject has yielded valuable insights into how factors such as public opinion, interest groups, the media, and political actors collectively influence government attention and agenda-setting.[5]

The study of attention and agenda-setting has gained momentum, thanks to a range of data infrastructure projects that empower scholars to analyze policy attention across issues, time, and countries. Among these initiatives, the Policy Agendas Project (PAP) stands out as one of the most popular and well-known. Though originally designed for studying political attention in the United States of America,[6] it soon became evident that PAP was equally applicable to many European countries.[7] Despite some shortcomings in coding and measurement,[8] PAP has drawn the interest of numerous scholars specializing in various countries and policy areas. These scholars, under the banner of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP), have brought together multiple country-specific datasets using the PAP coding scheme.[9] At present, CAP datasets encompass over twenty countries across the continents of North America, Europe, Asia, and Oceania. Notably, the project has recently further expanded to include three Latin American countries—Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador.[10]

Despite CAP's expanding coverage, data for China—the world's second largest economy—are not yet available at the time of writing,

although the country has been incorporated into the project. This data limitation may be a significant factor contributing to the relatively limited study of agenda-setting in China. Indeed, existing literature on government attention and agenda setting is predominantly concentrated in Western countries. However, the applicability of its explanatory power becomes uncertain when extended to countries where competitive elections are minimal or nonexistent, media freedom is limited, and citizen voices are weak. In such environments, questions arise about how government attention is allocated and what factors determine attention allocation.

We seek to answer these questions by compiling an original dataset on government attention, using textual content from China's government executive meetings. Our study distinguishes itself from existing literature in two important ways. Firstly, the focus on government executive meetings is particularly significant as these meetings represent one of the most crucial decision-making mechanisms in China. Despite Lieberthal and Dickson emphasizing the value of Chinese government meetings in their seminal work nearly half a century ago,[11] the content of these meetings has rarely undergone rigorous scrutiny by policy scholars. Secondly, our exploration of executive meetings adds a unique dimension to the extensive literature on policy attention in Western contexts, where the separation of powers and electoral politics contribute to a vibrant study of policy attention from various sources such as party manifestos, political debates, campaign advertisements, speeches by party leaders or proceedings of congressional hearings. Our study of China's government executive meetings sheds light on the distinctive attention dynamics where the executive branch is at the heart of a political system.

By applying CAP's coding scheme to 2,840 Chinese government executive meetings held from 2015 to 2018, we construct a panel dataset focusing on policy attention at the provincial level and a time series dataset capturing policy attention at the national level. These datasets not only enable us to delineate the policy preferences of various governments but also provide a framework for examining the interconnectedness of attention between different levels of government.

This article yields several noteworthy findings. Firstly, we observe distinct patterns of attention allocation between provincial governments and the central government. The former mostly focus on government operations, whereas the latter is more preoccupied with economic development. In addition, provincial governments' attention appears to be more dispersed and stable, in contrast to the central government, which

exhibits greater concentration and volatility. We term this phenomenon the country's "two agendas." Secondly, we examine the interconnection between the "two agendas" using panel data analysis. Our results indicate a significant impact of the central agenda on provincial governments' attention allocation. Given an additional mention of a policy area at the central level, the provincial governments will mention the same policy area 1.918 percent more times at their own executive meetings in the same year.

The contributions of this study are threefold. Firstly, we provide a new measure of government attention. Scholars of Chinese policy and politics tend to measure attention based on leaders' written directives, the number of policy documents, governmental work reports, and other published resources such as newspaper articles. In contrast, we turn our attention to government executive meetings to measure policy attention. This measure directly captures what is on the government's radar and thus has high validity. Secondly, our research contrasts with the growing literature on Chinese government attention, which is largely centered around a single level of government. For instance, Chen and colleagues study China's national leaders' attention through their written directives,[12] whereas Chan et al. examine the central government's policy attention during the Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping administrations by drawing on a wide variety of governmental documents.[13] Our research, in contrast, delves into government attention at both the central and provincial levels simultaneously, quantifying the relationship between the Center and provinces. Thirdly, our research also has implications for Western countries. The hierarchical responsiveness uncovered in a unitary context stands in stark contrast to the prevalent federal–state conflicts in federal systems.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The next section introduces the approach to studying politics in electoral democracies and makes a case for examining attention politics in the Chinese context. Following that, we introduce our data, the coding strategy, and the estimation methods. The subsequent section reports research findings, which encompass both descriptive analysis and regression results. Finally, the article concludes.

1. The Politics of Attention: A Literature Review

a. The Spatial Model of Party Competition

Ideally, voters elect into office political parties whose ideology is aligned with their policy preferences. Elected parties, in turn, enact policies to advance their welfare. The existence of multiple parties, as well as the preference heterogeneity of the electorate, means that parties have to compete for electoral support. Faced with uncertainty, parties must evaluate their policy stance by dividing issues along political ideologies.[14] The party competition model argues that instead of taking opposite sides on some policy issues, parties selectively draw public attention to issues that are advantageous to them.[15] This tendency is particularly evident in presidential campaigns, where candidates try to leverage issue ownership by highlighting their own issue areas and sidestepping opponents' issue assets.[16] For example, in the United States, voters generally expect the Democratic Party to advance social welfare, protect the environment, and ensure fair treatment of ethnic minorities. The Republican Party (or GOP), by contrast, is viewed as an upholder of traditional American values, small government and strong national security.[17] Issue ownership incentivizes the two parties to attend to their own issue areas, highlighting their strengths and taking advantage of their opponents' weaknesses.

In some situations, political parties, especially the Democratic Party, may trespass on issues associated with their opponents' party. This is due in part to the fact that many issues necessitating federal actions happen to be GOP issues,[18] but Damore argues that candidates' competitive standing and issue saliency can also play a role in their decisions to trespass.[19] Utilizing a formal model, Aragones et al. further elucidate the conditions under which parties may trespass.[20] Aware of the prominence of issues, dissatisfied political losers may have an incentive to invent and champion new issues so that the majority party's electoral coalition can be split, likely turning old losers into new winners.[21] In short, the party competition model places voters at the heart of politics and focuses on the strategies that political actors can adopt to optimize their electoral prospects.

b. Going beyond Democratic Politics: A Hierarchical Perspective

Attention politics can vary greatly across institutional contexts. In competitive politics, voters and political parties play central roles. China adopts a unitary system under one-party rule, setting it apart from many

Western countries characterized by multiparty competition and political decentralization. This uniqueness introduces two key differences: there are no competitive elections for high-level officials, thus reducing the influence of mass preferences on government attention; and the government remains relatively united, with policymaking less constrained by internal political struggles. Given these two differences, how can we examine and explain the allocation of government's attention in China?

In contrast to the party competition model, this article proposes a hierarchical perspective to study government attention. China, as a unitary state, follows a political system organized as a pyramid through top-down control, where immediate superiors hold subordinates accountable. In this system, the importance of an issue is usually determined by the Center,[22] with the ultimate authority residing there as well.[23] In the presence of central intervention, the behavioral logic of local governments can change dramatically from economic calculation to political motivation.[24] Typically, the central government points out the direction of development and formulates long-term plans, while subnational governments break down policy goals and concentrate on implementation, a process commonly referred to as "administrative subtracting."[25] Building political selection upon policy performance, China has proven the effectiveness of its governance system based on the unprecedented growth achieved in recent decades.[26]

Going beyond economic growth, however, local governments do not always act in accordance with the intent of the Center, which causes the political control problem.[27] The trade-off between centralization/control and decentralization/autonomy has been a crucial choice in China's administrative reforms for decades, resulting in a cyclical pattern of "tightening up" (centralization) and "letting go" (decentralization).[28] Notably, the past decade has witnessed a new round of recentralization reform in policy areas such as environmental governance and judicial administration. However, empirical research on recentralization efforts in these areas documents a null or limited effect on policy outcomes.[29] Despite the failure of institutional reforms, the Center has additional governance mechanisms to exert influence on lower-level governments. For instance, inspections, though initially introduced to curb corruption,[30] are found to be effective at enhancing local governments' attention to environmental protection.[31] In addition, the central government may deliberately use friction to reinforce bureaucratic control and stymie bottom-up coordination.[32]

In the past decade, some scholars have focused on leadership and agency attention in the study of Chinese politics, opening a new avenue for examining political control in central–local relations. Regarding dual management (雙重管理 *shuangchong guanli*) in policy areas such as judicial affairs and birth control, Lian notes that some government agencies must rely on the authority of the general-purpose government and party committee to push their agendas forward.[33] The difference in authority becomes more pronounced when examining a phenomenon across bureaucratic levels. Attention from the Center is crucial for subnational governments, as Zhang and Zhu find that central government's attention to administrative licensing reforms, measured by the number of directory policy documents, moderates the effects of horizontal pressures on innovation diffusion.[34] In a similar vein, Fan, Christensen, and Ma examine how provincial governments' attention to e-government impacts public sector innovation.[35] More recently, Tao and Tu draw on newspaper articles to compile a dataset on government leaders' written directives regarding China's environmental governance from 2005 to 2017. They find evidence for the transmission of leadership attention among central, provincial, and municipal leaders through the lens of government structure.[36]

However, the extant literature on Chinese government attention concentrates on very few policy areas, with each featuring its own uniqueness. It remains unclear how government attention travels across bureaucratic hierarchies when different governance modes and types of policy areas are taken into account. Firstly, China adopts varying governance modes depending on the type of a policy area. Whereas many policy areas like emergency management are characterized by local management (屬地管理 *shudi guanli*), other areas, such as the aforementioned environmental governance (before 2016) and birth control, follow dual management, involving the leadership of both the local government and upper-level supervising department. Moreover, certain agencies are vertically managed by an upper-level supervising department (e.g., tax and customs), immunizing them from the influence of local governments. These different governance modes have largely escaped scholarly attention among researchers of attention politics.

Secondly, there may be a mismatch between the priorities of the Center and the perceived self-interests of the localities. For example, whereas the central government prioritizes environmental protection, local governments may show little enthusiasm for championing this goal if doing so is perceived as likely to reduce prospects for economic

development, a paramount factor in political promotion.[37] Misaligned incentives between the Center and the localities have been commonplace in the reform era and have been manifested in interjurisdictional competition[38] and market fragmentation.[39] Taken together, the governance modes and incentive incompatibility may lead local interests to trump national policy goals. This study seeks to evaluate the linkage of Chinese government attention between the Center and localities across a wide array of policy areas.

2. Methodology

a. Data Source

As mentioned earlier, we use government executive meetings to examine policy attention. Information disclosure has become routine in China since 2007, when the Chinese government expended legislative efforts to increase government accountability through information disclosure. In accordance with this legislation, information about executive meetings at and above the county level should be disclosed through the respective government's website unless confidential items are discussed in the meeting. Consequently, information about executive meetings is readily available on Chinese government websites. We developed a scraping program to collect the proceedings of 2,840 executive meetings that took place between January 1, 2015 and December 31, 2018, at the central and provincial levels. Eventually, we identified 152 executive meetings held by the State Council and 2,688 executive meetings held by provincial government officials.

Although we intended to collect the population of government executive meetings, it must be noted that we ended up with a sample of the population. Due to confidentiality, some meetings were not disclosed to the public, escaping our data collection efforts. However, meetings involving confidentiality constitute only a tiny portion of government executive meetings, and they are very likely to be different from regular meetings in nature. For instance, executive meetings discussing COVID-19 lockdowns might well be classified as confidential to minimize panic and chaos. These meetings are fundamentally different from regular meetings that discuss health care reform and health insurance. They are ad hoc in nature, and they do not reflect the routine in public management as many exceptions could be permitted at times of

national emergency. Thus, our data are close to the population if we focus on the regular aspect of government management. Rubin argues that significance testing is still needed even with population data because (1) it can take chance into account, and (2) it is impossible to have true population data.[40] For these reasons, we provide significance testing for regression results so that they can still be meaningful for meetings taking place beyond the scope of our dataset (2015–2018).

b. Coding Scheme

We adopted the CAP scheme for coding the records of meetings. As outlined above, CAP is one of the most widely used datasets for studying policy attention across different countries. Fundamental to CAP's coding are the policy codes that represent different policy areas. At the time of writing, the CAP codebook included 21 major topics and 220 subtopics.[41] The coding system follows a hierarchical structure, with each subtopic falling exclusively within a single major topic.

Although the CAP codebook provides excellent guidance on coding policy documents, it cannot reflect policy realities across different countries.[42] Hence, we developed our coding manual based on CAP's codebook and made some minor revisions when necessary. For instance, "Immigration and Refugee Issues" is the ninth major topic in the CAP codebook. However, the salience of this topic is rather low in China. Indeed, China's National Immigration Administration was not founded until 2018. For this reason, we replaced this topic with "Talent and Population Management," reflecting the country's massive population mobility and the increasing emphasis on talented workers. In addition, we broadened some topics, such as agriculture and foreign trade, to make them applicable to a greater number of issues. Agriculture now encompasses all issues related to agriculture, including those related to peasants and the countryside, collectively known as "Issues Relating to Agriculture, Rural Residents and Rural Areas" (三農問題 *sannong wenti*) in China's context. Similarly, policy mentions of foreign capital are now classified within the category of foreign trade due to their relevance to this area. Finally, we added several new topics that are highly salient in Chinese politics, including the Management of State-Owned Assets, Safety and Stability, Affairs Related to Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, Poverty Reduction, and Emergency Management. After implementing these changes, we ended up with 26 major topic codes. However, two topics (Defense and

Affairs Related to Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan) were excluded from the analysis because they were never mentioned at the central level and were rarely mentioned at the provincial level. By and large, our major topics, detailed in Table A1 of the appendix, remain very similar to those used in CAP.

Our coding scheme works as follows. Firstly, we partition the textual content of each meeting into individual sentences or a group of closely related sentences. Then, we rely on a codebook to determine whether a sentence references any major policy topics. If so, we mark that sentence with a predetermined policy topic. In cases where a sentence contains more than one policy topic, we scrutinize the relationship between those topics to retain the primary topic and drop secondary ones. Finally, we aggregate the number of mentions in each document by policy topics to obtain a distribution of government attention across issues.

The proceedings of executive meetings follow a structured style. We hired and trained two research assistants (RAs) to code meeting records. The coding process unfolds as follows. Firstly, based on the CAP codebook and through in-depth discussions among the authors, we developed a coding manual detailing the rules for coding each policy topic. Secondly, we conducted a pilot coding of 100 government executive meetings randomly drawn from our dataset. In essence, the two RAs independently coded the same 100 meeting records. The coding manual underwent revisions based on the coding results. Thirdly, we continued to randomly draw and assign 300 documents to each RA in three batches to check inter-coder reliability. The batch-specific agreement rates are 92.49 percent, 93.75 percent, and 91.9 percent. The overall agreement rate is 92.71 percent, indicating the effectiveness of the codebook in providing guidance on coding and ensuring consistent coding by different RAs.

c. Empirical Strategy

This article performs descriptive and regression analyses to scrutinize the Chinese government's attention allocation at the central and provincial levels. Firstly, we pay attention to what issues attract China's provincial and central governments and, for those that do, to what extent. This is achieved by analyzing the relative proportion of mentions in each issue area. In addition to the distribution of policy attention, we also compare attention stability and fragmentation at the two levels. There has been a great deal of scholarly interest in whether government attention has

expanded in scope and fragmentation in tandem with rapid socioeconomic development over time.[43] Our analysis of the Chinese government can provide an interesting comparison. In line with many scholars who study political attention,[44] we measure attention fragmentation using Shannon's H entropy score. For attention stability, we follow Dowding et al.'s practice to obtain stability scores based on the following formula:[45]

$$AS_t = 100 - \left(\sum_{i=1}^{n} |PM_t - PM_{t-1}|\right)/2$$

where PM_t and PM_{t-1} represent the percentage of attention (measured by policy mentions) a government devotes to a policy topic i at time t and $t-1$, respectively. The absolute difference between them indicates the change in attention allocation from $t-1$ to t. We then add up the change over all 24 major topics. This summed difference is divided by 2 in light of the fact that the highest sum could be 200 when attention was devoted to completely different issues at t0 and t1 and the lowest could be 0 when attention allocation is identical between t0 and t1. This conversion ensures that the change always falls between 0 and 100. By subtracting it from 100, the meaning of the index is flipped, whereas its range remains the same between 0 and 100. If the attention allocation at time $t-1$ is identical to that at time t, PM_t should equal PM_{t-1}, and the summed difference should be 0, which will make the attention stability score equal to 100 at time t. If a government focuses attention on a completely different set of topics at time t and $t-1$, the summed difference divided by two will be 100, and the stability score will equal 0.

Secondly, although China is well-known for the top-down control exercised by higher-level principals over lower-level agents,[46] there have been few empirical investigations into whether local governments pay attention to central concerns. Drawing upon the policy attention dataset, we construct two agendas, one at the central and the other at the provincial level. Each of the agendas consists of 24 policy topics, and the variable of interest is the number of issue mentions across each topic. The dependent variable is issue mentions at the provincial level, and the key independent variable is issue mentions at the central level in the same year. To account for possible lag effects of central attention on local agendas, we include a one-year lag of central attention. Additionally, we control for provincial leaders' personal characteristics, such as age, education, and career experience. We also control for socioeconomic

conditions, including population, fiscal expenditure, and the geographical distance of provincial capitals from Beijing.

Drawing upon this panel dataset, we adopt a fixed effects model to control for unit-, year- and area-specific effects. The dataset allows us to control for unobserved time-invariant unit-specific factors on the one hand, and it can deal with time-variant yet unit-homogeneous effects on the other. This means that even if some policy areas differ in terms of their governance modes (vertical management v. jurisdiction-based management), the fixed effects models should capture the institutional differences because the governance mode of a policy area rarely changes over time and generally remains the same across localities. Finally, because issue mentions are essentially count data, we also perform a Poisson regression as a robustness check.

3. Findings: A Discovery of "Two Agendas"

### a. What Attracts the Attention of China's Central and Provincial Governments?

Figure 1 reports the share of attention by topics in China's executive government meetings at the central and provincial levels from 2015 to 2018. On one hand, at the central level, macroeconomics, government operations, and domestic commerce are the three most frequently discussed topics. Both macroeconomy and domestic commerce are pertinent to the economy, thus highlighting the salience of economic development on the Chinese central government's agenda. On the other hand, at the provincial level, government operations, macroeconomics, and environmental protection stand out as the top three issues receiving the most attention. Notably, government operations are the most mentioned issue type during this period, reflecting the challenges faced by provincial governments in leading local governments and promoting socioeconomic development within a multitasking hierarchical system.

Overall, there are both commonalities and differences in the focus of topics at the executive meetings of China's central and provincial governments. On one hand, both governments devote the greatest attention to issues relating to macroeconomics and government operations. To some extent, this reflects the importance of economic development and administrative management within the bureaucratic system. On the other hand, there are differences in the degree of attention given to some specific topics by the two levels of government. For example, central government

meetings pay substantial attention to domestic industry and commerce, whereas provincial governments devote approximately half this level of attention to the same issues. In nearly half of the policy areas, provincial governments devote a relatively higher level of attention than the central government. These differences probably reflect the division of responsibilities between the central and local governments, with the Center emphasizing macro control and the local governments responsible for public service provision and policy implementation.

It is noteworthy that issues such as environmental protection, safety and stability, and poverty alleviation draw more attention from provincial governments than from the central government. Because of their importance, the Party and government have established special committees to "supervise" them, potentially reducing their frequency of appearance at government executive meetings. However, policy mentions in these areas still show their importance to local governments' agendas. More specifically, provincial governments allocate nearly 7.97 percent of their attention to environmental protection, whereas the central government devotes only 1.17 percent of attention to this issue. This divergence may reflect the changing incentive for local government officials following the inclusion of environmental protection in the cadre evaluation system.[47] In addition, the heightened attention to safety and stability issues aligns with the long-standing emphasis on stability maintenance.[48]

Figure 1: The Distribution of Government Attention by Policy Areas (2015–2018)
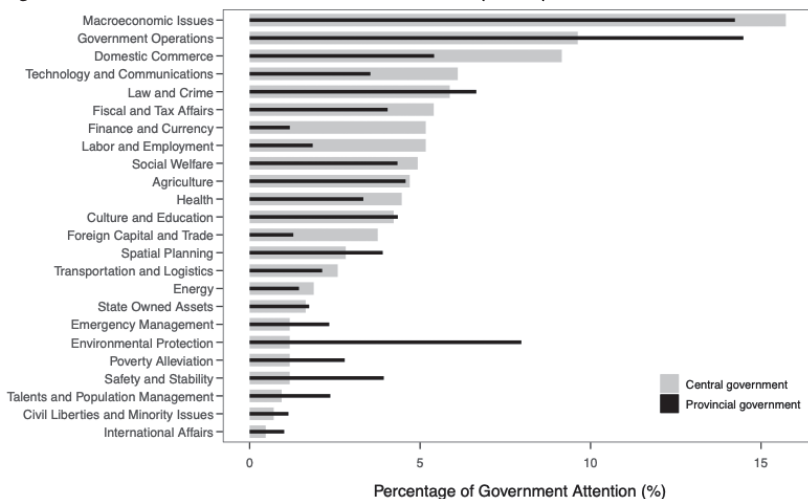
b. The Stability and Fragmentation of the Chinese Government's Policy Agenda

In addition to analyzing the distribution of policy attention at the central and provincial levels, we further examined the stability and fragmentation of attention allocation over time. On one hand, the governance process unfolds across a temporal dimension, thus raising questions about the constancy of attention to issues at all levels of government. On the other hand, we explore the level of fragmentation in government attention. To address these inquiries, we integrate time-series data for the 24 available policy topics at the central and provincial levels, introducing two indicators—stability scores and entropy scores. The former measure the monthly change in government attention allocated to a policy area, ranging from 0 to 100, with higher values indicating more stable attention allocation. The latter assess the entropy value of all policy areas, with a larger value signifying that the government is attentive to a more diverse set of policy issues.

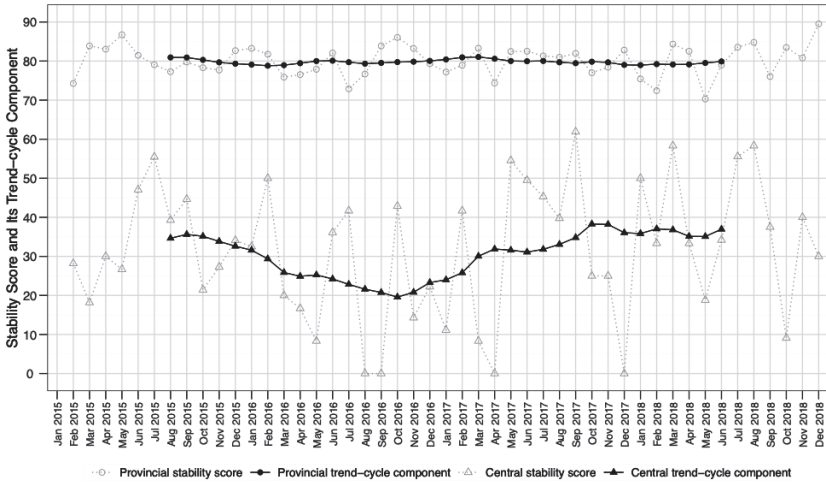Figure 2: The Stability Scores of Policy Attention in Executive Meetings

Figure 2 depicts the monthly attentional stability scores for the provincial and central governments in China from 2015 to 2018. We computed both raw stability scores (marked by empty circles and

triangles) and the corresponding trend-cycle components that are purged of seasonality and noise (marked by solid circles and triangles). The y-axis shows the amount of attention devoted to the same set of issues in a month relative to the previous month. Overall, the attention of provincial governments is very stable, with approximately 80 percent of attention constantly devoted to the same issues. In contrast, the central government tends to pay attention to policy areas in an unstable manner. Using the trend-cycle component, for example, we find that the stability scores of the central government are between 20 and 40. This finding starkly contrasts with a recent study on Chinese top leadership's attention dynamics, which reports attention stability scores of 75.97 and 79.66 for China's General Secretary and Premier in the period 2001–2017.[49] The discrepancy between their research and this article may arise from the use of different formulas for computing stability scores, but the authors of that article fail to disclose or elaborate on their empirical approach. Taken together, Figure 2 suggests that the governance at the central level is more likely to reflect changing realities and ad hoc adjustment.

Figure 3: The Fragmentation of Policy Attention in Executive Meetings
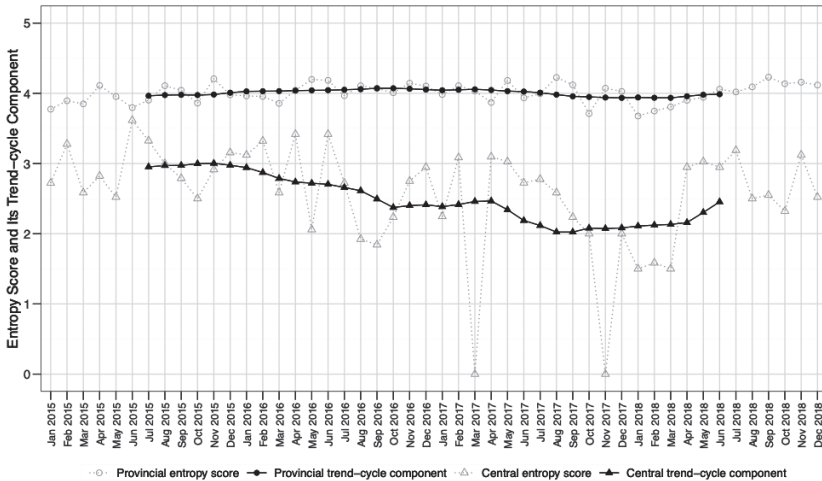
Given that government attention is a limited resource, the government can only focus on a small number of policy areas at any given time point. The entropy score in Figure 3 illustrates the extent of fragmentation

of policy attention. Over a certain period of time, the entropy values of policy attention in Chinese provincial executive meetings fluctuate near four, indicating that provincial governments focus on a relatively large number of issues each month. At the central level, the entropy scores are considerably lower than those at the provincial level over the same period, with the lowest value approaching two. While the central government focuses on much fewer policy areas than local governments do in each month, its attention fragmentation is comparable to that of Western counterparts. For instance, the entropy scores of Australian government attention fluctuate near 2.5 and have never reached 3 for over half a century since the end of WWII.[50] Likewise, the British government's entropy scores fluctuate near 2.5 throughout the period from 1960 to 2005.[51]

In short, substantial differences exist in the distribution of policy attention between the central and provincial governments in China. These distinctions manifest not only in policy preferences but also in the stability and fragmentation of issue attention. Firstly, the central government focuses more attention on macroeconomic and domestic business issues that impact the livelihood of the nation, while provincial governments prioritize government operations and specific public service matters. Secondly, provincial governments exhibit more fragmented attention, with a relatively stable level of attention devoted to each policy area. In contrast, the central government focuses on relatively fewer policy areas, and notably, experiences greater instability in attention allocation. The same policy topic may receive varying levels of attention in adjacent months, possibly reflecting the central government's role in "gatekeeping" macroeconomic issues, "guiding" different policy areas at different time points, and releasing timely policy signals for the current period. Our findings diverge from the study by Tao and Chu, revealing an opposite scenario regarding the stability and fragmentation of policy attention across governments.[52] We speculate that differences in their use of newspaper articles and the focus on written directives may contribute to these disparities.

These findings offer profound insights into governance practices in China. The central government, tasked with "steering" the ship, constantly identifies new problems and makes decisions based on the actual situation. Consequently, its attention to issues is much less stable than that of provincial governments, and its level of attention varies depending on the severity and complexity of the problem. The role of

provincial governments is more akin to "paddling," as they are primarily responsible for policy implementation after the central government has set the direction (e.g., GDP growth targets). In addition, the principle of territorial management prevents provincial governments from shifting their attention to the macro area, as this falls within the domain of the central government. In consequence, the attention of provincial governments is both highly diffuse and highly stable.

4. Regression Analysis of the Two Agendas

The preceding descriptive analysis reveals the policy preferences of the central and provincial governments and the stability and fragmentation of policy attention. This section explores the linkage of policy agendas between the central and provincial governments. The Chinese bureaucracy follows a strict hierarchical system in which higher levels of government and agencies serve as the principal and lower-level government as the agent. Do local governments respond to the concerns of higher-level governments? We attempt to answer this question with regression analyses. The dependent variable is local governments' attention across policy areas, while the independent variable is the attention given by the central government to the corresponding policy area. We build a three-level panel dataset across 24 policy areas, 31 provincial units and 4 years, from 2015 to 2018. This dataset contains 2,976 observations in total.

We use both OLS and Poisson regression models. The dependent variable in this paper takes integers, so an OLS model can be employed. However, given that issue mentions are essentially count data, a Poisson regression model might be more appropriate. Because our data are time series, we adopt a finite distributed lag (FDL) model to take lagged effects into account. To this end, we take a one-year lag of the central attention and include it in our model. In addition to the main independent variables, we control for the governor's educational background, age, tenure, path to office, per capita GDP of the province, population, fiscal revenue, and geographic distance from the provincial capital city to Beijing. The regression results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Regression Results from the Finite Distributed Lag Model

	Dependent Variable: Number of Mentions at the Provincial Level					
	OLS regression			*Poisson regression*		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Central Attention	0.379***	0.377***	0.109***	0.069***	0.068***	0.019***
	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.030)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.006)
Lagged Central Attention	0.153***	0.156***	0.065***	0.037***	0.037***	0.012**
	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.024)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.005)
Master		0.410	0.648**		0.124**	0.227***
(0=Bachelor)		(0.270)	(0.299)		(0.050)	(0.074)
Doctor		0.555**	0.262		0.161***	0.170*
(0=Bachelor)		(0.271)	(0.377)		(0.051)	(0.093)
Age		0.037	0.104***		0.011***	0.033***
		(0.023)	(0.032)		(0.004)	(0.008)
Tenure		-0.148***	-0.143***		-0.041***	-0.041***
		(0.048)	(0.048)		(0.009)	(0.012)
Outside promotion		-0.659***	-0.019		-0.182***	-0.015
(0=Central designation)		(0.200)	(0.212)		(0.033)	(0.047)
Local promotion		-0.772***	-0.381		-0.217***	-0.080
(0=Central designation)		(0.189)	(0.233)		(0.032)	(0.053)
GDP per capita		-0.006	0.009		-0.002***	0.003
		(0.004)	(0.014)		(0.001)	(0.003)
Population		0.007	0.283		0.002*	0.075
		(0.008)	(0.221)		(0.001)	(0.050)
Fiscal expenditure		0.141	-3.388		-0.001	-1.182*
		(0.795)	(2.636)		(0.138)	(0.644)
Geographical Distance		-0.0001	0.228		-0.00002	0.048
		(0.0001)	(0.408)		(0.00002)	(0.096)
Fixed effects			√			√
Constant	1.187***	-0.417	-292.930	0.674***	0.198	-61.658
	(0.100)	(1.365)	(509.054)	(0.018)	(0.238)	(119.402)
Observations	2,232	2,232	2,232	2,232	2,232	2,232
Adjusted R^2	0.297	0.311	0.631			
Akaike Inf. Crit.				11,356.800	11,218.640	8,674.085

Note: Fixed effects include year, provincial and policy area fixed effects. *$p < 10\%$. **$p < 5\%$.
     ***$p < 1\%$.

We find a significant association between the central government and provincial governments in terms of attention allocation. The more attention the central government pays to a policy area, the more attention the provincial government will pay to the same area, suggesting bottom-up responsiveness inside the Chinese bureaucracy. Take Model (2) as an example. For every mention of a policy area by the central government, the provincial government mentions it 0.377 times on average. The coefficient is less than one, suggesting an attenuation of local responsiveness to the central government. If local governments are expected to pay more attention to a policy area, then the central government may need to emphasize it more frequently. Model (5) presents the results based on a Poisson regression model with a regression coefficient of 0.068, indicating that for each additional mention of a policy area by the central government, the number of mentions by local governments increases by 7.04 percent. Models (3) and (6) demonstrate that the effect of central government attention on the local agenda still obtains after the fixed effects of year, province and policy area are considered, although the effect magnitude shrinks.

In regard to control variables, we also obtain some interesting results. Firstly, we observe significant lag effects of central attention. Additionally, there is a significant association between the personal characteristics of the governor and the attention of the provincial government. The older the governor is, the more attention given to a particular policy. However, governors' tenure also matters. Governors who have taken office for a longer period of time tend to respond less on average. There is also an effect associated with the path along which a governor has been promoted. In comparison with governors promoted locally or from other jurisdictions, governors directly appointed by the Center tend to be more attentive to central preferences. This is understandable given their linkage to the Center. Other control variables largely fail to pass the significance test at conventional levels.

The above analysis demonstrates the significant responsiveness of provincial attention to the central government's policy agenda. The greater the focus of the central government on a particular policy area, the more attention is devoted to that policy by local governments. It remains unclear, however, whether all provincial governments are equally responsive in this way, and whether this responsiveness exists across all policy areas. Given the large regional differences in China's socioeconomic development levels and the aforementioned different preferences

of central and local governments on policy issues, a more detailed exploration of central and local attention responsiveness is warranted.

We disaggregated the raw data and then conducted multiple rounds of panel data analysis by policy area and province. Firstly, we split the raw data into 24 smaller province–year panel datasets by 24 policy areas, with each panel dataset containing 124 observations. Then, we analyzed these small panel datasets with Poisson regression models to identify whether there was attention responsiveness in the corresponding policy areas. The dataset covers only 4 years, and the lagged variable results in 3 years available for analysis. Thus, adopting a unit fixed effects model may result in a "high variance" issue.[53] For this reason, we made use of between-group variation and control for year fixed effects instead. Secondly, we used a similar approach to subset the original data by province, generating a total of 31 small policy area–year panel datasets, with each panel dataset containing 96 observations. Then, we estimated year fixed effects models again to examine whether attention responsiveness is prevalent across provinces. The magnitude, direction and statistical significance (5 percent level) of the marginal effects of central attention are visualized in Figure 4.

The area-based panel data analysis suggests that provincial governments' responsiveness to central government attention occurs in less than 50 percent of the 24 policy areas. Civil liberties and minority issues, culture and education, agriculture, law and crime, as well as labor and employment demonstrate significant responsiveness at the provincial level. Additionally, safety and stability, environmental protection and domestic commerce also pass the significance test at the 0.05 level despite the minimal effect size. Interestingly, there is no significant responsiveness in policy areas that attract the most government attention (e.g., macroeconomy and government operations). This finding suggests that the central agenda is not necessarily the sole determinant of attention allocation at localities. Last but not least, we find "responsiveness reversal" in several policy areas including poverty alleviation and environmental protection. A reduction in central attention to these areas is associated with an increase in attention to them at the provincial level. These policy areas have been highly salient in recent years.[54] The central government may resort to channels other than executive meetings to pressure local governments. For instance, a recent study by Wang, Ma and Wu reveals that central environmental inspection (CEI) can influence local elites' attention allocation, which in turn shapes industrial structure upgrading.[55]

Figure 4: The Marginal Effects of Central Attention by Policy Area and Province
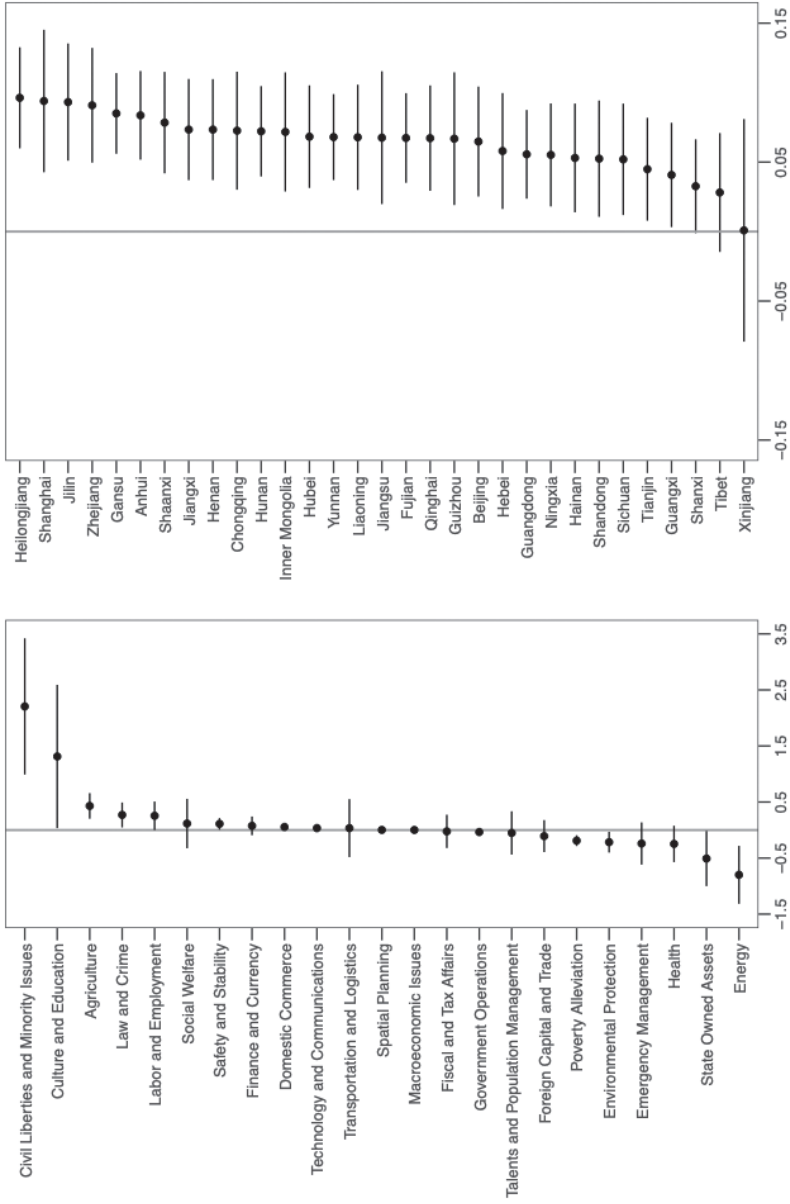
On the other hand, the analysis of the panel data based on provinces shows that provincial responsiveness to central attention is present in 28 of the 31 provinces. This is especially remarkable in light of the small sample size of 96 observations in each year fixed effects model. The most responsive province is Heilongjiang province. An additional mention of a policy area in the Center is associated with a 10.1 percent increase in Heilongjiang provincial government's attention to the same area. The exceptional provinces without evidence of significant responsiveness to the Center include Shanxi, Tibet and Xinjiang.

To explain the variation in provincial responsiveness to the Center, we recoded the dependent variables to generate *attention convergence* and *attention divergence*. Then, we regressed them on a host of provincial covariates. The regression results can be found in Table A2 in the Appendix. Interestingly, it turns out that whether the attention of provincial and central governments converges on policy matters may depend in part on the governor's age. We find that a one-year increase in a governor's age is associated with an increase in attention convergence by 1.093 and a decrease in attention divergence by 4.473. Admittedly, this preliminary analysis is speculative, and some shortcomings remain to be considered. For example, we did not examine the role of provincial party secretaries, an issue worthy of further exploration in future studies.

5. Conclusion

Since the late 1990s, scholars have made substantial efforts to trace governmental agendas by drawing on various sources of data. The Policy Agendas Project has become one of the most influential projects for studying government attention across a wide range of national contexts. As the second largest economy, China has not received sufficient attention until very recently. Many scholars have now begun to focus on government attention, with substantial efforts to measure it based on government work reports, administrative documents, and leaders' written directives. While the expanding literature on policy attention deepens our understanding of China's governance, very few studies, to date, have successfully examined government attention across bureaucratic hierarchies and policy areas simultaneously. This article aims to fill that gap.

Utilizing an original dataset coded from government executive meetings, we delineate the characteristics of government attention at the central and provincial levels. Our analysis reveals distinct policy

preferences between central and provincial governments. The central government focuses mostly on the macroeconomy, government operations, and commerce, whereas provincial governments display a higher level of attentiveness toward government operations, the macroeconomy, environmental protection, and other public services. In addition, the central government's attention allocation tends to be more concentrated and volatile, whereas provincial governments consistently maintain a much more fragmented policy agenda over time.

Despite the different characteristics of policy preferences and attention allocation across central and provincial governments, we find compelling evidence that provincial governments respond to the central policy agenda. In other words, bureaucratic pressure from above acts as a driving force in agenda-setting in Chinese localities. This finding suggests that local governments are responsive not only to societal actors but also to the policy agenda of the Center.[56] This top-down transmission of attention inside the government contrasts with the bottom-up responsiveness observed in Western politics. For instance, Garand finds that state-level income inequality polarizes public opinion, which further translates into polarized ideological positions among U.S. senators.[57] More importantly, our findings provide compelling evidence against the fragmented authoritarianism thesis that, as Lieberthal and Oksenberg put it when reviewing pertinent arguments, "China is thus a cellular economy and polity, with the territorial components of the system surprisingly self-sufficient and capable of thwarting and subverting Beijing's demands."[58]

Hierarchical responsiveness holds profound implications for understanding Chinese politics and governance. Scholars studying transition economies often compare China's experience with that of Russia, highlighting the crucial role of political centralization in determining the outcomes of fiscal decentralization.[59] Despite China's remarkably successful policy performance in recent decades, scholars have debated whether the Chinese government can maintain the same degree of tight control over its bureaucrats following the abandonment of the planned economy.[60] Selective policy implementation,[61] fragmented domestic markets,[62] and concealed corruption[63] all serve as compelling evidence of weakening state capacity. More recently, Xiao and Zhu have argued that the central government's efforts to increase bureaucratic control through central guidelines may be futile due to reduced compliance among local regulators and contingent factors such as fiscal affluence and information asymmetry.[64] Contrary to this strand of literature, we present evidence

supporting Huang and Edin's argument that indeed the central government can still exercise control over local elites, even at the advanced stage of the reform era, through agenda setting.[65]

This study has several limitations. Firstly, this article only examines policy attention and does not delve into real-world policymaking. It is possible that local leaders make decisions against the central agenda despite showing attentiveness to the Center at their executive meetings. Secondly, government attention may be influenced by objective conditions, public opinion and government ideology.[66] Exploring the role of public opinion and objective conditions in the allocation of government attention could provide valuable insights. Thirdly, this study restricts its examination to executive meetings, and it might be beneficial to incorporate information from other sources, such as legislative records or the speeches of China's political elites, including the president, premier, and provincial governors. In summary, further research is necessary to enhance our understanding of China's attention politics.

Appendix

Table A1: Major Topics and Subtopics

Major Topics	Subtopics
Safety and Stability	Public security, production safety, letter and visit work, social stability
Government Operations	Rule of law, government building, government report revision
Environmental Protection	Ecological protection, pollution prevention and control, ecological compensation
Culture and Education	Cultural and educational development and derivative products
Macroeconomic Issues	Economic development planning, economic goals, industrial layout (upgrading)
Finance and Currency	Finance, banking and currency
Health	Public health, medical insurance
Social Welfare	People's livelihood, disability, pension, social welfare
Foreign Capital and Trade	Introduction of foreign investment, foreign trade (International Investment Fair)
Energy	Energy planning, management
Transportation and Logistics	Transportation construction, logistics development
Emergency Management	Sudden disaster (accident) prevention, management, rescue
Agriculture	Agriculture, rural areas, farmers (housing reconstruction, arable land red line)
Spatial Planning	Town development planning, urbanization, resource census
Technology and Communications	Technology development, communication
Talents and Population Management	Talent work, population, household registration management
Law and Crime	Legal and regulatory changes, enactment, crime
Commerce	Domestic business and industrial development
International Affairs	Openness to the outside world, international exchange
Poverty Reduction	Escape from poverty
Fiscal and Tax Affairs	Finance, taxation, audit
State-owned Assets	State-owned enterprises, institutions, state-owned assets
Civil Affairs and Ethnic Minorities	Human rights protection, government supervision, religion, and proposal management during the two sessions, turnover
Labor and Employment	Employment and entrepreneurship, protection of workers' rights and interests

Table A2: Examining Determinants of Attention Convergence/Divergence

	Dependent Variables			
	Attention Convergence		Attention Divergence	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Age	1.085***	1.093***	-7.077***	-4.473**
	(0.408)	(0.413)	(2.652)	(1.938)
Tenure	0.119	0.208	3.436	-3.783
	(0.609)	(0.659)	(3.956)	(3.095)
Master	2.419	1.414	0.941	11.465
	(4.201)	(4.269)	(27.312)	(20.051)
Doctor	5.330	4.830	-42.631	-13.443
	(5.171)	(5.240)	(33.622)	(24.612)
Outside promotion	-0.706	-0.604	-33.164*	-25.083*
	(2.951)	(2.951)	(19.189)	(13.861)
Local promotion	-3.537	-2.960	-5.485	10.324
	(3.138)	(3.168)	(20.402)	(14.881)
GDP per capita	0.076	0.079	-2.580**	-1.245
	(0.187)	(0.190)	(1.219)	(0.892)
Population	2.004*	2.385**	-12.080*	-8.392
	(1.106)	(1.125)	(7.188)	(5.283)
Fiscal expenditure	21.476	-8.808	-190.216	70.709
	(22.275)	(31.463)	(144.824)	(147.774)
Geographical Distance	0.011	1.457	23.818	2.856
	(2.977)	(3.219)	(19.353)	(15.118)
Constant	-85.111	-1,865.863	-28,013.560	-2,575.171
	(3,684.589)	(3,978.330)	(23,955.690)	(18,685.440)
Provincial fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects		✓		✓
Observations	124	124	124	124
R^2	0.573	0.592	0.547	0.774
Adjusted R^2	0.375	0.380	0.337	0.657

Note: 1, Attention convergence is coded based on a comparison between provincial governments and the central government. If both mentioned a policy area in the same year, we consider their attention to be convergent in that year and code that area as 1. This variable measures the average convergence across the 24 policy areas. 2, Attention divergence is coded based on provincial governments' deviations of attention from the center. For instance, mentioning a policy area 5 or 9 times at the provincial level in the presence of 7 mentions in the Center results in a deviation of 2. Attention divergence is averaged across 24 areas. 3, $*p < 10\%$. $**p < 5\%$. $***p < 1\%$.

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